L. E. Chittenden, “An Historical Letter,” July 1898
(keywords: Lucius Eugene Chittenden, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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An Historical Letter.

It is not often that historical fact and humor are so happily combined as in the following interesting letter from our valued friend, the Hon. L. E. Chittenden, who vividly narrates his early experiences as a photographic sitter:

MY DEAR MURPHY:

You ask for a confession of my first experience in the art of Daguerre, and since confession is good for the soul, you shall have it.

In September, 1842, when I was eighteen years old, I had read Blackstone, and thought myself a greater lawyer than I have since supposed or claimed myself to be. I was at the Court of Franklin County in St. Albans, Vt. There I met two peripatetic artists from the great City of Boston, who were offering to make portraits of such accuracy that they were more like than the sitter, for five dollars each. They called them Daguerreotypes. They had not been able to secure a victim, for the mechanism was fearfully made and its operation awful to behold!

They offered to give me my portrait if I would endure the trial. I was ambitious and did not wish to deprive the bar of the opportunity of securing my portrait so cheaply, and in a moment of weakness I consented. The operators rolled out what looked like an overgrown barber’s chair with a ballot box attachment on a staff in from of it. I was seated in the chair and its Briarean arms seized me by the wrists, ankles, waist and shoulders. There was an iron bar which served as an elongation of the spine, with a cross bar in which the head rested, which held my head and neck as in a vice. Then, when I felt like a martyr in the embrace of the Nuremburg “Maiden,” I was told to assume my best Sunday expression, to fix my eyes on the first letter of the sign of a beer saloon opposite, and not to move or wink on pain of “spoiling the exposure.” One of the executioners then said I must not close my eyes or move for ten minutes, at the end of which he would signal by a tap on the ballot box. The length of that cycle was too awful for description.

Some days afterward the portrait was produced. It was a portrait with a tremolo attachment of wavy lines, the eyes leaden, the nose too large, the expression dull and
heavy. And yet it was regarded as a triumph of art. The printing of anything directly from
the object was in itself so extraordinary that one scarcely thought of criticising the print. I
myself thought it was the most wonderful advance in art that had ever occurred. Now
when I recall the pitiful results of this experiment and mentally compare them with the
exquisitely beautiful illustrations in the number of Camera Notes you have sent me, I
cannot but feel that the world owes a larger debt to photography than to wood and line
engraving and etching combined. I think I have never seen an etching which surpasses
the “Lombardy Pastoral” in all the qualities that makes an etching attractive.

Cordially yours,

(Signed),

L. E. CHITTENDEN.

March 14, 1898.

[End of text.]